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## THE PRIORITY OF THE SILVER BLUFF CHURCH AND ITS PROMOTERS

In speaking of the beginning of Negro churches in the United States, those of the Baptist faith must not be forgotten. Nor must we err in thinking that the first churches of this faith were planted in the North. It is true that there were Negro Baptists in Providence, Rhode Island, as early as 1774,<sup>1</sup> and doubtless much earlier, but they had no church of their own. Indeed, there is absolutely no trace of Negro Baptist churches in the North prior to the nineteenth century. The oldest Negro Baptist churches, north of Mason and Dixon's Line, are the Independent or First African Baptist Church, of Boston, Massachusetts, planted in 1805; the Abyssinian, of New York City, established in 1808; and the First African, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, organized in 1809.<sup>2</sup>

Negro Baptist churches, unlike other Negro churches, had their beginning in the South, and at a somewhat earlier date. The first church of Negro Baptists, so far as authentic and trustworthy writings of the eighteenth century establish, was constituted at Silver Bluff,<sup>3</sup> on Mr. Galphin's<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Benedict's *History of the Baptists* (edition, 1848), p. 454. Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, 1801-1802, p. 836.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 397, 577, 620. Compare with edition 1813, Vol. II, pp. 504, 509, 515.

<sup>3</sup> See Ramsey's *History of South Carolina*, Vol. I, p. 158, note 19, p. 159; Steven's *History of Georgia*, Vol. I, pp. 255-256; Gibbes' *Documentary History of American Revolution* (South Carolina), Vol. I, pp. 235-236 and 158-159; Furman's *History Charleston Baptist Association*, p. 77; Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, 1790-1793, pp. 445, 474, 477, 541; *State Papers, Indian Affairs*, Vol. I, pp. 15, 32, 35, 36; Lossing's *Field Book of Revolution*, Vol. II, p. 484; article on Henry Lee in Appleton's *Cyclopedia*, Vol. X, p. 487; *Light Horse Harry* in Larner's *History of Ready Reference*, Vol. V, pp. 32-74-5; *American Cyclopedia*, Vol. II, p. 378; N. W. Jones' *History of Georgia*, Vol. II, pp. 136-138; Abraham Marshall in Catheart's *Baptist Encyclopedia*, Vol. II, p. 349.

<sup>4</sup> George and John Galphin, brothers, are mentioned in *State Papers*,

estate, a year or two before the Revolutionary War. It continued to worship there, in comparative peace, until the latter part of 1778, when the vicissitudes of war drove the church into exile<sup>5</sup>—but only to multiply itself elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> The work at Silver Bluff began anew with the cessation of hostilities, moreover, and was more prosperous than ever in 1791.<sup>7</sup>

Silver Bluff was situated on the South Carolina side of the Savannah River, in Aiken County, just twelve miles from Augusta, Georgia.<sup>8</sup> All there was of it, in September, 1775, seems to have been embraced in what William Tennett, of Revolutionary fame, styled “Mr. Galphin’s Settlement.”<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, as it lay in the tract of the Revolutionary forces, and was for a time a center of supplies to the Indians, who had their habitation in that quarter, living

*Indian Affairs*, Vol. I, pp. 32, 35, 36, 158, 159. Thomas Galphin is referred to in Rippon’s *Annual Baptist Register*, 1790–1793, pp. 540–541. Milledge Galphin, according to Act of Congress, passed August 14, 1848, and statement of United States for 1850, set forth in Lossing’s *Field Book of the American Revolution*, Vol. II, p. 484, received in settlement of his claim against the United States as heir of George Galphin, \$200,000.

<sup>5</sup> For date of fall of Savannah, Dec. 29, 1778, Sir Archibald Campbell in Appleton’s *Cyclopedia of American Biography*, Vol. I, p. 511, and for troubles at Silver Bluff, South Carolina, see Rippon’s *Annual Baptist Register*, 1790–1793, p. 477, and compare with pp. 473–480 and 332–337. For conditions necessitating the exile of Silver Bluff Church, see letter of Wm. H. Drayton, written from Hammond’s place near Augusta, Georgia, August 30, 1775, to the Council of Safety in Gibbes’ *Documentary History of the American Revolution* (South Carolina), Vol. I, p. 162, and for distance from Silver Bluff see letter of Rev. Wm. Tennett, p. 236, and compare with note in Lossing’s *Field Book of the American Revolution*, Vol. II, 484. See also Rev. Tennett’s letter of September 7, 1775, for movement of men at Silver Bluff and surrounding country. Gibbes’ *Documentary History of the American Revolution* (South Carolina), Vol. I, pp. 245–246.

<sup>6</sup> Rippon’s *Annual Baptist Register*, 1791, p. 336, compare with 1790–1793, pp. 476–477.

<sup>7</sup> See Rippon’s *Annual Baptist Register* for 1793, pp. 540–541. Compare with 1790–1793, pp. 544–545.

<sup>8</sup> Lossing’s *Field Book*, p. 484; Steven’s *Georgia*, Vol. II, pp. 255–256, etc., as above in note 3.

<sup>9</sup> Gibbes’ *Documentary History American Revolution*, Vol. I, pp. 235–236; Furman’s *History Charleston Baptist Association*, p. 77, and compare letters of George and John Galphin in *State Papers*, *Indian Affairs*, Vol. I, pp. 15, 35, 36, and G. No. 2, p. 32.

in treaty relations with the colonists, Ramsey, Carroll, Drayton,<sup>10</sup> and others, give it a place on the map of South Carolina. Indeed, so identified was Silver Bluff with the Galphins, their interests and their influence, that by 1785 it was known far and near as Galphinton. Fort Galphin was there. Bartram, who visited it in 1776, says that Silver Bluff was "a very celebrated place," and describes it as "a beautiful villa," while the picture which Jones, in his history of South Carolina, gives of Silver Bluff, is animating, to say the least.<sup>11</sup>

David George, who was one of the constituent members, and the first regular pastor of the Silver Bluff Church, is our authority in regard to the early history of this flock. We make the following extracts from letters of his, published in London, England, in connection with other foreign correspondence, during the period from 1790 to 1793:

Brother Palmer,<sup>12</sup> who was pastor at some distance from Silver

<sup>10</sup> Ramsey's *History of South Carolina*, Vol. I, p. 158.

<sup>11</sup> Steven's *History of Georgia*, Vol. II, pp. 255-256; article on Henry Lee, Appleton's *American Cyclopedia*, Vol. X, p. 487.

<sup>12</sup> But who was "Elder Palmer," the man who planted the first of this series of churches? David George states that he was a powerful preacher, and that he was pastor of a church some distance from Silver Bluff. We are satisfied that the church alluded to was not in South Carolina, nor in Georgia, nor were the members of the church in question, nor its pastor, of African descent. It is our opinion that "Elder Palmer" was no less a distinguished person than Wait Palmer, the founder of the First Baptist Church of Stonington, Connecticut. It was possible that he should be the cause of this remarkable beginning of Negro Baptist churches in the United States, for he was living and active during and prior to the Revolutionary period, and long before.

Wait Palmer, of Stonington, Connecticut, moreover, was, as his biographer states, "an actor in the great New Light, or Separatist movement," and in this capacity he "preached often in destitute regions." Benedict testifies that "he became a famous pioneer in Virginia and North Carolina." But what is more, Mrs. Marshall, the mother of Abraham Marshall, of Kiokee, Georgia, was a sister of Shubal Sterns, and Shubal Sterns was baptized and ordained to the work of the ministry by Wait Palmer, at Tolland, Connecticut, in the spring of 1751. It was but natural that, in his zeal to preach Christ in destitute regions, Palmer would visit this Connecticut family and preach the gospel to any who might desire to hear it.

If it should be thought by some that no man would, in the circumstances, have gone on a preaching tour from Connecticut to South Carolina, it may be well to recall the fact that Rev. Abraham Marshall covered the ground in ques-

Bluff, came and preached to a large congregation at a mill of Mr. Galphin's; he was a very powerful preacher. . . . Brother Palmer came again and wished us to beg Master to let him preach to us; and he came frequently. . . . There were eight of us now, who had found the great blessing and mercy from the Lord, and my wife was one of them, and Brother Jesse Galphin. . . . Brother Palmer appointed Saturday evening to hear what the Lord had done for us, and next day, he baptized us in the mill stream. . . . Brother Palmer formed us into a church, and gave us the Lord's Supper at Silver Bluff. . . . Then I began to exhort in the Church, and learned to sing hymns. . . . Afterwards the church advised with Brother Palmer about my speaking to them, and keeping them together. . . . So I was appointed to the office of an elder, and received instruction from Brother Palmer how to conduct myself. I proceeded in this way till the American War was coming on, when the Ministers were not allowed to come amongst us, lest they should furnish us with too much knowledge. . . . I continued preaching at Silver Bluff, till the church, constituted with eight, increased to thirty or more, and 'till the British came to the city of Savannah and took it.<sup>13</sup>

The first clear conception of time, which we get from these extracts, in regard to the origin of the Silver Bluff Church, is where David George speaks of being left in sole charge, as Liele and Palmer might no longer visit Silver Bluff, lest in so doing, they should impart to the slaves of the settlement a knowledge, which, in the then prevailing conditions, would result in their personal freedom, and, consequently, in great financial loss to their masters. This undoubtedly was not later than November, 1775, when the Earl of Dunmore issued on American soil a proclamation

tion, in the year 1786, travelling both ways on horseback, preaching nearly every day during the three months he was away from home. But Palmer was now in the South and not in the North, as Benedict states. No other Palmer, known to Baptists, fits the case like this friend of Shubal Stearns. We shall continue to assign to him the credit of the first Negro Baptist Church in America, until we can find another "Elder Palmer," whose claim is absolutely certain. See Rippon, *Annual Baptist Register*, 1790-1793, pp. 475-476; Cathcart's *Baptist Encyclopedia*, II, 882.

<sup>13</sup> Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, edition 1790-1793, pp. 473-480, and compare article, Sir Archibald Campbell, in Appleton's *Cyclopedia of American Biography*, Vol. I, p. 511.

of emancipation, in which the black slaves and the white indentured bondmen were alike promised freedom, provided they espoused the cause of England, in its struggle with the colonists. How well these slaves understood and appreciated the proffered boon, may be inferred from a letter which was written by Stephen Bull to Col. Henry Laurens, President of the Council of Safety, Charleston, South Carolina, March 14, 1776. In that letter he says: "It is better for the public, and the owners, if the deserted Negroes who are on Tybee Island be shot, if they cannot be taken."<sup>14</sup> By this means, as he informs us, he hoped to "deter other Negroes from deserting" their masters. According to Bull's representation, the Negroes along the Savannah River were abandoning their masters, and now going to the British in scores and hundreds, to the detriment of their owners, and the menace of the cause of American independence.

Now George Liele, although not a runaway slave, appears to have had some liking for the Tybee River, as a place of abode, and it is probable that when he could no longer visit Silver Bluff, and was not in camp with Henry Sharp (who had not only given him his freedom, but also taken up arms against the Revolutionists), he reported to Tybee Island to preach to the refugees there assembled. At any rate, when Liele appears in Savannah, Georgia, as a preacher of the Gospel, his biographer declares that "He came up to the city of Savannah from Tybee River."<sup>15</sup>

The next hint which we get from the statements of David George, in regard to the time when the Silver Bluff Church was planted, is where he says that George Liele preached at Silver Bluff both before and after the organization of the church. Happily, Liele himself refers to Silver

<sup>14</sup> See Bull's letter of March 12, and one of March 14, 1776; also March 26, 1776, printed in Gibbes' *Documentary History of the American Revolution* (South Carolina), Vol. I, pp. 266-273. Compare with letter in Vol. II, p. 62. See also Dunmore's Emancipation Proclamation issued in November, 1775, in Joseph T. Wilson's *Emancipation*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>15</sup> *Cyclopedia American Biography*, Vol. I, p. 511. Compare with Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, edition 1790-1793, pp. 332-333.

Bluff as a place where he used to preach. Liele also informs us that he became a Christian about two years before the American Revolution, but did not immediately connect himself with a church; that when he did join, he became a member of Matthew Moore's church, in Burke County, Georgia; that he was a member of this church about four years; that his membership terminated with the evacuation of Savannah; that he preached at Yamacraw and Brumpton Land about three years; and that he went to Jamaica, in the West Indies, in the year of 1782.

Let us consider carefully these facts, with reference to time. The three years, which preceded 1782, were 1781, 1780, 1779. This brings us to the evacuation of Savannah by the Americans, within two days, as the British captured the city December 29, 1778. The four years which preceded 1779 were 1778, 1777, 1776, 1775. We understand from George Liele's statements concerning himself, therefore, that he became a member of Matthew Moore's church at the close of the year 1774, or the beginning of 1775, but was converted at the end of the year 1773, and let a whole year, or nearly so, pass before becoming a church-member.

It is probable that George Liele did not wait to be received into the fellowship of a church before going from plantation to plantation to tell his fellow slaves of the blessing of salvation which he had experienced. He may have thus declared the love of Christ, at Silver Bluff, as early as 1773, as Burke County, Georgia, in which he lived, is in part practically adjacent to Aiken County, South Carolina, in which was Silver Bluff. Accordingly, we are warranted in concluding that the Negro Baptist Church at Silver Bluff was constituted not earlier than 1773, nor later than 1775.

In making these deductions, we bear in mind that the year 1777 has been designated as the time of Liele's conversion, 1778 as the time when he united with Matthew Moore's church, and four years later, or 1782, as the time when his membership in that church ceased. In explanation of this view its advocates insist that the three years in

which Liele preached at Brumpton Land and Yamacraw are included in the four years during which he was a member of Matthew Moore's church. According to this claim, the Silver Bluff Church could not have been planted earlier than 1777 nor later than 1778.

We do not share this view for good and sufficient reasons. When Liele, in 1779, went to Savannah to reside, during the British occupancy, he became separated from Matthew Moore's church and the people of Burke County, Georgia, for all time. With the British troops he entered Savannah, as the Americans had evacuated it at the very close of the year 1778. With the British he remained in Savannah during his three years stay in that city, and with one of their officers he left the country, in 1782, for Kingston, Jamaica, British West Indies, where he spent the remainder of his life. His four years of connection with Matthew Moore's church, therefore, must have preceded the year 1779, covering the time from the latter part of 1774 to the latter part of 1778.

As George Liele informs us that he became a Christian about two years before the American War, those who place his conversion in the year 1777 are compelled to reckon the beginning of the Revolutionary War from the year 1779. Errors are hard things to substantiate, and force men to choose between strange dilemmas. But, in explanation of this absurdity, it is claimed that the Revolutionary War did not make itself manifest in Georgia and South Carolina until about the year 1779, and the Negroes of Georgia and South Carolina, in speaking of it, would refer to that year as the beginning of the war. But as a matter of fact, the Revolutionary struggle in South Carolina and Georgia was manifest from the very first. Thus the biographer of Abraham Marshall, of Kiokee, Georgia, having informed his reader that the subject of his sketch was ordained to the work of the Gospel ministry on May 20, 1775, adds, "Just as he had chosen his life work, the Revolutionary War broke out, and Georgia became a scene of violence and



bloodshed. During almost the entire struggle, the people were subject to the combined outrages of Britons, Tories and Indians.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus, too, the biographer of Gov. John Houston's trusted slave, Andrew C. Marshall, writes, “The embargo having taken effect in Savannah at the opening of the Revolution, fifteen merchants of that city agreed to give him a purse of \$225.00 if he would carry word to several American vessels that lay in a bay on the lower seaboard, in which achievement he was successful.”<sup>17</sup> The expression, “the opening of the Revolution,” in this passage, refers to the year 1775, and not to 1778-1779, for the British attacked the city of Savannah as early as March 3, 1776, and would have captured it if they had not been repulsed by the Americans.

The English agents, their American allies (the Tories), and the Cherokee Indians, who resided in the neighborhood of Silver Bluff and made it the commercial mart it was in colonial times, took up the cause of the British against the revolutionists from the very beginning of the war. Accordingly, William H. Drayton, of South Carolina, on August 30, 1775, urged the sending of foot-soldiers and mounted men to the vicinity of Augusta, Georgia, to protect the interests of the patriots, and chasten their foes.<sup>18</sup>

Eight days later, September 7, 1775, William Tennett, of South Carolina, wrote in his journal as follows: “Went ten miles to New-Savannah, where I had appointed a meeting of inhabitants, in hopes to draw an audience out of Augusta, from Mr. Galphin's Settlement, and Beach Island, but most of the men having marched with Mr. Drayton, and

<sup>16</sup> Cathcart's *Encyclopedia*, Vol. II, p. 749, and compare article of John Houston in Appleton's *Cyclopedia of American Biography*, Vol. III, p. 273.

<sup>17</sup> Appleton's *Cyclopedia of American Biography*, Vol. IV, p. 219. Compare Vol. III, p. 273. See article, Savannah in Appleton's *American Cyclopedia*, Vol. III, p. 646.

<sup>18</sup> See Drayton's letter in Gibbes' *Documentary History of American Revolution* (South Carolina), Vol. I, p. 162, and for distance from Silver Bluff compare letter of Tennett, p. 235, note in Lossing's *Field Book of Revolution*, Vol. II, p. 484.

Mr. Galphin being from home, I had but few.”<sup>19</sup> To this same neighborhood Col. Andrew Williamson led a large force of South Carolinians, in defense of the American cause, some time later, and General Griffith Rutherford, with 2,400 men, reinforced him, September, 1776.

In view of all these statements in regard to the time when the Revolutionary War began to make itself manifest in Georgia and South Carolina, we conclude that when George Liele says he was converted to Christianity about two years before the Revolutionary War, he refers to the year 1773, and his visits to Silver Bluff were at an end by the summer of 1775. We are, therefore, driven back to our first affirmation, namely, that the Negro Baptist Church at Silver Bluff, South Carolina, was organized not earlier than 1773, nor later than 1775.

The writers who have insisted that Mr. Liele united with Matthew Moore's church in 1778, and terminated that membership in 1782, have followed what is undoubtedly an erroneous inference. Liele said, "I continued in this church about four years till the 'vacuation.'" But as the expression seemed to Dr. Rippon indefinite in some particulars, he sought information from persons who were supposed to be capable of guiding him, and added five words to the statement of Liele, which made it read as follows: "I continued in this church about four years, 'till the 'vacuation'—of *Savannah by the British*." <sup>20</sup> Dr. Rippon carefully states that "Brother George's words are distinguished by inverted commas, and what is not so marked, is either matter compressed, or information received from such persons to whom application had been made for it."

It is easy enough to see how the inference was drawn, for in one of his letters Liele says, "Our beloved Sister Hannah Williams, during the time she was a member of the church at Savannah, until the 'vacuation, did walk as a faithful, well-beloved Christian." <sup>21</sup> Here there is no room

<sup>19</sup> Gibbes' *Documentary History of the American Revolution* (South Carolina), Vol. I, pp. 235-236, letter of Tennett, of September 7, 1775.

<sup>20</sup> Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, 1770-1773, pp. 332-337.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1790-1793, p. 344.

for doubt. Liele speaks in this case of the evacuation of Savannah by the British, July, 1782, but in the former instance the only evacuation of Savannah which harmonizes with the story of his own life, the events and circumstances of his time, and those of his associates, is the evacuation of Savannah by the Americans, December 29, 1778.

GEORGE GALPHIN—PATRON OF THE SILVER BLUFF CHURCH

The planter and merchant on whose estate the Silver Bluff Church was constituted is deserving of special mention in connection with the story of that people. We learn from White's *History of Georgia*, that George Galphin was "a native of Ireland, emigrated soon after manhood to America, and died at Silver Bluff, his residence, on the Savannah River, in South Carolina, on the second of December, 1782, in the seventy-first year of his age." N. W. Jones, in his history, quotes William Bartram as saying that George Galphin was "a gentleman of very distinguished talents and great liberality."<sup>22</sup>

The spirit of justice and kindness, it appears, was manifest in all his dealings with the peoples of the weaker races, who were daily about him. The red man and the black man alike saw in him a man of kindly soul. David George, who was ever a British subject, described his former master as an "anti-loyalist." N. W. Jones, speaking as an American, pronounced him a "patriot." Neither spoke of him except to praise. A master less humane, less considerate of the happiness and moral weal of his dependents, less tolerant in spirit, would never have consented to the establishment of a Negro church on his estate. He might have put an end to the enterprise in its very incipency, but he did not. He fostered the work from the beginning. It was by his consent that the gospel was preached to slaves who resided at Silver Bluff. It was by his permission that the Silver Bluff Church was established. It was he who permitted David George to be or-

<sup>22</sup> White's *History of Georgia*, pp. 246-247; Jones, Vol. II, p. 137.

dained to the work of the ministry. It was he who provided the Silver Bluff Church with a house of worship, by permitting his mill to be used in that capacity. And it was he who gave the little flock a baptistry, by placing his mill-stream at their disposal on baptizing occasions. But we are satisfied that he had no conception of the far-reaching influence of these deeds of kindness.

The truth is, the Galphins appear to have been masters of the patriarchal type. Thomas Galphin, under whose beneficence the work at Silver Bluff was renewed in post-bellum time, was, as we shall see, as much the benefactor and protector of Jesse Peter, as George Galphin had been of David George before, and during the earlier stages of the Revolutionary War.<sup>23</sup> Accessible records reveal the fact that John Galphin was an Indian interpreter and a friend of the Cussetahs. It is indeed suggestive that, in 1787, these Indians wished a Negro, whom John Galphin owned, to be a messenger with one of their men to the whites.

#### THE SILVER BLUFF CHURCH IN EXILE

With the fall of Savannah, at the very close of the year 1778, the Silver Bluff Church completed the first stage in its history. At that time Rev. David George, the pastor, and about forty other slaves, whom George Galphin had abandoned in his flight, went to Savannah, to find safety and freedom under the British flag. Later David George returned to South Carolina, and abode for a time in the city of Charleston. Thence, in 1782, he sailed to Nova Scotia, in company with not less than five hundred white persons, who were adherents of the British cause. In Nova Scotia he abode ten years, preaching to the people of his own race who had found their way into that portion of the continent, in large numbers, after abandoning their homes in the United States.

These labors were performed amid hardships and persecutions, but in faithfulness to God and suffering humanity.

<sup>23</sup> *State Papers, Indian Affairs*, Vol. I, G. No. 2, p. 32.

In prosecuting his mission, he preached in Shelburn, Birchtown, Ragged Island, and in St. Johns, New Brunswick. So pronounced was the opposition to his labors in New Brunswick, that he found it necessary to invoke the protection of the civil authorities. How well he succeeded in doing so, may be imagined from the subjoined statement:

“Secretary’s Office, Fredericktown, 17th July, 1792, I do hereby certify that David George, a free Negro man, has permission from his Excellency, the Lieutenant Governor, to instruct the Black people in knowledge, and exhort them to the practice of the Christian religion. Jno. Odell, Secretary.”<sup>24</sup>

It should excite in us no surprise that David George was opposed in his labors in his new home, for, as Lorenzo Sabine declares, “the original population of this Colony was composed almost entirely of the Loyalists of the Revolution.”<sup>25</sup> They had not changed their views in regard to the rights of Negroes, by being removed from a land where the two races had hitherto sustained the relation of master and slave. The real surprise lies in the fact, that the secretary of the province was himself a preacher, a minister of the Episcopal Church, and a former resident of the State of New Jersey.

So effective were the arduous labors of David George that he is enrolled among the pulpit pioneers, in Bill’s history of Canadian Baptists. He was certainly first to plant a Baptist church at Shelburn, as well as a number of feeble beginnings elsewhere. But Canada was only a temporary home to David George, and to others from the States. Accordingly, he took a colony of Negroes to Sierra Leone, British Central Africa, in 1782.

Of this distant colony, G. Winfred Hervey remarks: “The first settlers of Sierra Leone were what they needed to be, men of bravery. They consisted of about 12,000

<sup>24</sup> See Jonathan Odell, Appleton’s *Cyclopedia of American Biography*, Vol. IV, p. 556; Rippon’s *Annual Baptist Register*, 1790–1793, p. 481; Bill’s *History of the Canadian Baptists*, pp. 26, 176, 653, 657. Compare with Rippon’s *Annual Baptist Register* for 1798–1800, p. 336.

<sup>25</sup> Sabine’s *American Loyalists*, Vol. I, p. 127. Compare pp. 122–123.

colored men who had joined the British forces in the American Revolution. At the close of the war they were sent to Nova Scotia, but the climate proving too unfriendly to them, they were, in 1792, transported to Sierra Leone."<sup>26</sup> One of the first things that David George did, after reaching Africa, was to plant a little Baptist church, which was composed of Negroes from America who had arrived in their fatherland by way of Nova Scotia.

In order to stimulate in the English people an intelligent interest in the colony of Sierra Leone, and secure for the Baptist cause in Freetown the sympathy and aid of English Baptists, David George took a trip to London, England, shortly after establishing himself on the continent of Africa. It was this visit to the metropolis of the world which doubtless, more than anything else, facilitated the collection and publication of many facts then existing and ascertainable in regard to Negro Baptist preachers and their churches in the eastern and western hemispheres.

In visiting Europe, David George took with him letters of commendation from persons of recognized standing in England. John Rippon, the distinguished London divine, thus speaks of David George, after investigating his standing: "Governor Clarkson, in the most unreserved manner, assured me that he esteemed David George as his brother, and that he believes him to be the best man, without exception, in the colony of Sierra Leone."<sup>27</sup> Had the Silver Bluff Church done nothing more than produce this one earnest Christian man, this faithful preacher of Christ, this potent factor in the planting of a colony under the English flag, it would not have existed in vain, but it did more.

### THE SILVER BLUFF CHURCH REVIVED

When peace had been restored, and the Revolutionary forces had been disbanded or recalled, Silver Bluff re-

<sup>26</sup> G. W. Hervey, *Story of Baptist Missions in Foreign Lands*, p. 596. Compare article on Sierra Leone in Appleton's *American Cyclopaedia*, Vol. XV, p. 32; also article on Nova Scotia, Vol. XII, pp. 524-525; See Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, 1790-1793, pp. 481-483. See also article on Sierra Leone in *The Earth and its Inhabitants—Africa*—Vol. III, p. 207.

<sup>27</sup> Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, 1790-1793, pp. 481-484.

sumed once more the aspect of social distinctions between master and slave in colonial times. Once more, too, the Galphin place became a center of religious activities, and the Negro Baptists of Silver Bluff were more numerous than ever.

The man who was instrumental in resuscitating the work at Silver Bluff was Jesse Peter, who, according to an old custom of applying to the slave the surname of the master, was better known as Jesse Galphin, or Gaulfin. Having been connected with the Silver Bluff Church from the very first, and only separated from it during the Revolutionary War and the period of readjustment immediately thereafter, Jesse Peter was eminently fitted, at least in one particular, to take up the work at Silver Bluff which David George had abandoned in the year 1778. He knew the place and he loved the people. Silver Bluff was his home, and there he was held in high esteem. Moreover, he possessed what is essential to ministerial success everywhere, deep sincerity, seriousness of purpose, knowledge of the Bible, an excellent spirit, and the ability to deliver, with profit and pleasure, the message of the truth. Jonathan Clarke, and Abraham Marshall, who knew him personally, have left on record beautiful testimonials of his work and his worth.<sup>28</sup>

Why this young man, who had obtained his freedom by going to the British at the fall of Savannah,<sup>29</sup> in 1778, remained in America to resume the condition of a slave, after the Revolutionary War, is not known. It is known, however, that, unlike George Liele and David George, men of adventurous spirit, Jesse Peter was not a pioneering worker in strange fields. If, indeed, he ever traveled beyond Kiokee, Georgia, in the one direction, and the city of Savannah in the other, we have failed to note the fact. It is known, too, that he had an indulgent master, and it is pos-

<sup>28</sup> Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, 1790-1793, pp. 473, 544-545; 1791, p. 336; 1793, pp. 540-541.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph T. Wilson's *Emancipation*, pp. 36-38; Dunmore's Emancipation Proclamation issued 1775.

sible that he preferred a state of nominal slavery, under his protection, to a probable state of want and hardship in a foreign land. Or it may be he was willing to die for the cause, and so deliberately entered again into the old condition of bondage in order to enjoy the privilege of preaching, where Liele and George had labored in other days.

It is to be presumed that Jesse Peter was regularly ordained to the work of the Gospel ministry. We take this view because he exercised the duties and privileges which ordination implies, without ever being called in question for doing so. His three years of association with Liele and George, in Savannah, during the British occupancy, moreover, afforded him ample opportunity to be publicly and regularly consecrated to his life-work. Certainly Abraham Marshall, of Kiokee, Georgia, would not have associated himself with Jesse Peter in the ordination of Andrew Bryan, of Savannah, in 1788, if Jesse Peter had not himself been ordained to the work of the ministry.

Conditions in the earlier stages of Jesse Peter's pastorate at Silver Bluff were such that he did not reside at his old home, but came and went as a stated visitor. Accordingly, Jonathan Clarke, writing from Savannah, Georgia, December 22, 1792, says, "Jesse Peter (whose present master is Thomas Galphin), is now here, and has three or four places in the country, where he attends preaching alternately."<sup>30</sup> George Liele, writing from the West Indies, in 1791, had said to Joseph Cook, of South Carolina, "Brother Jesse Galphin, another black minister, preaches near Augusta, in South Carolina, where I used to preach."<sup>31</sup> Referring to him, George White speaks as follows: "On the 20th of January, 1788, Andrew, surnamed Bryan, was ordained by Rev. Abraham Marshall, and a colored minister named Jesse Peter, from the vicinity of Augusta."<sup>32</sup> Benedict, referring to Andrew Marshall, in the same connection, states that "he was accompanied by a young preacher of

<sup>30</sup> Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, 1793, pp. 540-541.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 1791, p. 336.

<sup>32</sup> White's *Historical Collections of Georgia*, p. 316.



color, by the name of Jesse Peter, of Augusta.”<sup>33</sup> From these testimonies, it is evident that Jesse Peter was a non-resident pastor of the Silver Bluff Church from 1788 to 1792, if not for a longer period.

During the first period of Jesse Peter's pastorate at Silver Bluff, another slave, who lived in that locality, began to preach. Andrew Bryan, writing from Savannah, Georgia, December 28, 1800, refers to him in the following manner: “Another dispensation of Providence has greatly strengthened our hands and increased our means of information: Henry Francis, lately a slave of the widow of the late Col. Leroy Hammond, of Augusta, has been purchased by a few humane gentlemen of this place, and liberated to exercise the handsome ministerial gifts he possesses amongst us, and teach our youth to read and write.” He adds, “Brother Francis has been in the ministry fifteen years, and will soon receive ordination.”<sup>34</sup> According to Andrew Bryan, Henry Francis was a half-breed, his mother being white, his father an Indian, but I find in a letter, written by another from the city of Savannah, May 23, 1800, that he is characterized as “a man of color, who has for many years served Col. Hammond, and has handsome ministerial abilities.”<sup>35</sup>

The question easily suggests itself, was Henry Francis a member of the Silver Bluff Church when, in 1785, he began to preach? We infer that he was, from certain known facts as to his place of abode, and his opportunities for church membership. In the first place, he lived in the immediate neighborhood of Silver Bluff. William Tennett informs us that the Hammond place was in South Carolina, four miles from Augusta, Georgia and Lossing, Abraham Marshall, and others, that Silver Bluff was also in South Carolina, twelve miles from Augusta. It was easy, therefore, for Henry Francis to attend divine service at the Silver Bluff Church. In the second place, it was the custom

<sup>33</sup> Benedict's *History of the Baptists*, p. 170.

<sup>34</sup> Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, 1798-1801, p. 367. Compare 263.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

of the slaves on the neighboring plantations to attend preaching at Silver Bluff during the pastorate of David George,<sup>36</sup> and the custom doubtless prevailed during Jesse Peter's pastorate. If Henry Francis attended church at Silver Bluff, he did only what other slaves of the neighborhood did. Furthermore, there was no other Baptist church, white or colored, in the neighborhood, for Francis to join. Marshall's church at Kiokee, Georgia, was twenty miles above Augusta, while Botsford's Meeting House, in the opposite direction, was "25 or 30 miles below Augusta."<sup>37</sup> In Augusta itself, there was no Negro Baptist church until 1793,<sup>38</sup> and no white Baptist church until 1817.<sup>39</sup> To our mind the conclusion is inevitable that Henry Francis, in 1785, was a member of the Negro Baptist church, at Silver Bluff, South Carolina.

In reaching this conclusion, moreover, we have been not a little influenced by the fact that when Henry Francis was formerly ordained to the ministry at Savannah, Georgia, seventeen years after he had commenced to preach, and when he was an officer in the Negro church at Savannah, the ordination sermon was not preached by Dr. Henry Holcombe, of the white church of that city, nor by Andrew Bryan of the First African, but by Jesse Peter,<sup>40</sup> pastor of the Silver Bluff Church. We can account for the deference shown Jesse Peter, on this occasion, only on the presumption that Henry Francis was converted, baptized, and licensed to preach at Silver Bluff, and that Jesse Peter was the instrument used in bringing these results to pass. It is evident, then, that the Ogeeche African Baptist Church,<sup>41</sup> on the Ogeeche River, fourteen miles south of Savannah, organized in the year 1803, is more indebted to the Silver

<sup>36</sup> Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, 1790-1793, p. 476.

<sup>37</sup> Benedict's *History* (edition 1848), p. 723.

<sup>38</sup> Benedict's *History of the Baptists* (edition 1813), Vol. II, p. 193.

<sup>39</sup> Article on Augusta, Georgia, First Baptist Church of, Cathcart's *Baptist Encyclopedia*, Vol. I, p. 49.

<sup>40</sup> James M. Simm's *First Colored Baptist Church in North America*, p. 57.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

Bluff Church for her first preacher and instructor of youth than to any other church.

Of Jesse Peter's ministry at Silver Bluff, as a resident pastor, we are not well informed. In a letter written from Kiokee, Georgia, May 1, 1793, Abraham Marshall speaks of him as follows: "I am intimately acquainted with Jesse Golfin; he lives thirty miles below me in South Carolina, and twelve miles below Augusta. He is a Negro servant of Mr. Golfin, who, to his praise be it spoken, treats him with respect."<sup>42</sup> Jesse Peter, then, was resident pastor of the Silver Bluff Church in the early spring of 1793. From another source we learn that the membership of the Silver Bluff Church, at this time, was sixty or more.<sup>43</sup>

#### THE CHURCH AT AUGUSTA

Here we lose sight of the Silver Bluff Church, just as the First African Baptist Church, of Augusta, Georgia, better known as the Springfield Baptist Church, comes into being. Jesse Peter had secured standing and recognition for the First African Church, at Savannah, Georgia,<sup>44</sup> and Henry Francis had been ordained for the Ogeeche Church by him and Andrew Bryan and Henry Holcombe. It was natural, then, that he would wish for his work at Silver Bluff the standing and recognition which had been secured for the work in and about Savannah, Georgia. In order to obtain this boon, and have his work in touch with that near the seacoast, it would be necessary to transfer its place of meeting from the State of South Carolina to the State of Georgia, where he had a friend, who was able to bring things to pass. It is in this way alone that we account for

<sup>42</sup> Benedict's *History of the Baptists*, edition 1813, Vol. II, p. 193, quoted from Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*.

<sup>43</sup> Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, 1791, p. 336.

<sup>44</sup> White's *Historical Collections of Georgia*, p. 316; Benedict's *History of the Baptists* (edition 1848), p. 740. Compare with Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, 1793, p. 545. Benedict's *History of the Baptists*, edition 1848, p. 727, note 5, shows no white minister was present except Abraham Marshall, and he says here he "assisted in the constitution of the church, and the ordination of the minister."

the beginning of the First African Baptist Church at Augusta at the very time when the Silver Bluff Church disappears. The curtain falls on the Silver Bluff Church, with Jesse Peter as pastor, when the church is reported as in a flourishing condition. The curtain rises, and again we see a flock of devoted Christians, with Jesse Peter as pastor, but they are twelve miles away from Silver Bluff, South Carolina, receiving from Abraham Marshall and another white Baptist minister the regulating touches which gave the body standing and influence as the First African Baptist Church, of Augusta, Georgia.

Here is what Benedict says of the body: "This church appears to have been raised up by the labors of Jesse Peter, a black preacher of respectable talents, and an amiable character. It was constituted in 1793, by elders Abraham Marshall and David Tinsley. Jesse Peter, sometimes called Jesse Golfin, on account of his master's name, continued the pastor of this church a number of years, and was very successful in his ministry."<sup>45</sup> If, as we presume, the Silver Bluff Church is still with us, in another meeting-place and under a new name, the oldest Negro Baptist church in this country today is that at Augusta, Georgia, having existed at Silver Bluff, South Carolina, from the period 1774-1775 to the year 1793, before becoming a Georgia institution.

#### THE FIRST AFRICAN BAPTIST CHURCH OF SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

The story of the Silver Bluff Baptist Church would not be complete without reference to the Negro Baptist Church at Savannah, Georgia, which existed before Andrew Bryan became a Christian. Neither E. K. Love, a recent pastor of the First African Baptist Church, nor James M. Simms, of the Bryan Church, have intimated, in their respective histories, that Savannah had a Negro Baptist church before the 20th of January, 1788. Nevertheless, the fact remains that during the British occupancy—that is, from the year

<sup>45</sup> Benedict's *History of the Baptists* (edition 1813), Vol. II, p. 193.

1779 to the year 1782—there was at Savannah, Georgia, an African Baptist church.

If the Negroes of Savannah had been without a Baptist church from 1779 to 1782, it would have been strange indeed. For David George led a company of fifty or more fugitive slaves from Galphinton, South Carolina, into that city at the close of the year 1778, and this company, it is reasonable to infer, included a considerable part, if not nearly all, of the members of the Silver Bluff Church. Devout Christians who had enjoyed such privileges as slaves, and that for years, in South Carolina, would scarcely be satisfied without them in Georgia, as free men, when they had with them three preachers of the Gospel, David George, George Liele, and Jesse Peter, men of their own race and denomination, men from the vicinity of Augusta, who had figured in the planting and growth of the Silver Bluff Church.

We are glad that we have historical data which establish the fact that there was a Negro Baptist church in Savannah from 1779 to 1782, and that the Negro Baptist ministry, which had made itself felt at Silver Bluff for the centuries to come, was now embraced in the church at Savannah. But in this church, it will be seen, George Liele, the eldest of the trio, was the pastor, and not David George. George Liele, as servant of the British officer, who had given him his freedom, could secure for the church recognition and influence, at the hands of the military government then in possession of Savannah, which neither David George, nor Jesse Peter, could obtain. Liele was with a man who had influence with the British government. David George and Jesse Peter, as strangers and fugitives, were unknown to that government, and without influence. It is in this way that we account for the fact that George Liele, and not David George, was pastor of the church. Under ordinary circumstances, the Silver Bluff element, which probably included nearly the whole church at the beginning, would have insisted upon having their old pastor.

In seeking facts, which make it manifest that Savannah, Georgia, had a Negro Baptist church prior to 1788, we have consulted the testimony of persons who were connected with the church at the time, and that of persons of recognized standing who were contemporaneous with them and competent to testify. Joseph Cook, of Euhaw, Upper Indian Land, South Carolina, in a letter to Dr. John Rippon, London, England, dated September 15, 1790, uses the following language: "A poor Negro, commonly called Brother George, has been so highly favored of God, as to plant the first Baptist church in Savannah, and another in Jamaica."<sup>46</sup> As Hervey, Cox, Phillipo, and others who have noticed the missionary efforts of Negro Baptists in the West Indies, inform us that George Liele left the United States in 1782 and began preaching at Kingston, Jamaica, British West Indies, in 1784, it is evident from Cook's letter that the church which Liele planted at Savannah existed prior to 1782.<sup>47</sup> Cook is corroborated by F. A. Cox, who, in speaking of George Liele, in his history of the Baptist Missionary Society of England, states that "He had been pastor of a colored congregation in America." A paragraph which we take from the *History of the Propagation of Christianity Among the Heathen*, is of the same nature. It refers to the church of which Mr. Cook speaks, in this manner: "The first Baptist preacher in Jamaica was a black man named George Liele, who, though a slave, had been the pastor of a Baptist church in Georgia. He was brought to Jamaica about 1782." Liele, on his own behalf, testified that there was a Negro Baptist church in Savannah, Georgia, during the British occupancy, and mentions by name at least three of its members, who were not in this country, after the British withdrew their forces from Savannah, in 1782. In a letter to Joseph Cook, written from Jamaica, in 1790,

<sup>46</sup> Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, 1791, p. 332.

<sup>47</sup> Hervey's *Story of Baptist Missions in Foreign Lands*, pp. 611-612; Cox's *History of the British Baptist Missionary Society, 1792-1842*, p. 12. Phillipo, *Jamaica, Past and Present*; E. K. Love's *History First African Baptist Church*, p. 35; Brown, *Propagation of Christianity among Heathen*, Vol. II, p. 94.

Liele refers to one of these members in the following manner: "Also I received accounts from Nova Scotia of a black Baptist preacher, David George, who was a member of the church at Savannah." <sup>48</sup>

In a communication written in 1791 and addressed to the pastor of a London church, Liele refers to one of his Jamaica members in this style: "Sister Hannah Williams, during the time she was a member of the church at Savannah, until the 'vacuation, did *walk* as a faithful, well-behaved Christian." <sup>49</sup> In answer to questions in regard to Jesse Peter, Liele replied to his London correspondent as follows: "Brother Jesse Gaulphin, another black minister, preaches near Augusta, in South Carolina, where I used to preach. He was a member of the church at Savannah." <sup>50</sup>

In the face of this testimony, coming from different sources and from parties widely separated from each other who had no motive to deceive, there is absolutely no room for doubt as to the fact that a Negro Baptist church existed in Savannah, Georgia, from 1779 to 1782.

As to what measure of prosperity attended the work of the Negro Baptist church at Savannah, Georgia, during the years 1779-1782, we are not informed. It was well that at a time when churches in some parts were going to pieces because of the ravages of war, this little flock remained intact. We infer, however, that it did a most blessed work. George Liele speaks in one of his letters of one "Brother Amos," <sup>51</sup> who appears to have been a product of the Negro church at Savannah, or the older church at Silver Bluff, South Carolina. Amid the changes wrought in the closing days of the Revolutionary War, this Negro preacher had his lot cast in New Providence, Bahama Islands, British West Indies. According to George Liele, Amos had a membership of three hundred in 1791. Benedict informs us that

<sup>48</sup> Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, 1791, p. 336, and compare Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, 1790-1793, pp. 476, 481-483.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1791, p. 344.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 1791, p. 336.

<sup>51</sup> Benedict's *History of the Baptists* (edition 1813), Vol. II, p. 206.

Amos was in correspondence with his brethren in Savannah, Georgia, in 1812, and at that time the church at New Providence numbered eight hundred and fifty.

#### A REMNANT OF LIELE'S CHURCH IN SAVANNAH AFTER THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

What portion of the Savannah Church remained in America, after the evacuation of the city of Savannah by the British, in 1782, we are not able to state. But blessings and trials attended both that portion of the flock which went abroad and that which remained. Andrew Bryan, Hannah Bryan, Kate Hogg, and Hagar Simpson,<sup>52</sup> were among the last converts received into the fellowship of the Negro Baptist church at Savannah before the pastor, the Rev. George Liele, sailed for the West Indies in 1782. These and probably others, like Jesse Peter, remained in America after the restoration of peace between the United States and the "mother-country," and labored under Andrew Bryan, their new spiritual leader, for the continuation of the work which had been so blessed of God under the labors of George Liele.

From Liele's departure, in 1782, to the time of Andrew Bryan's ordination, in 1788, the little flock at Savannah, Georgia, was bitterly persecuted, but its work for resuscitation, and progress, was wonderful—wonderful because of the moral heroism which characterized it. It is reasonable to suppose, however, that much of the opposition to the church at Savannah from 1782 to 1787 was due to the circumstances in which it had come into being, and not to any real antipathy to the cause of Christ. For it must be borne in mind that it was a creature of the Revolutionary War, and of British origin, having been planted when the rightful people of Savannah were languishing in exile, or heroically struggling with the enemy in other parts of the country. Bryan and his associates were beaten unmercifully for

<sup>52</sup> James M. Simm's *The First Colored Baptist Church in North America*, p. 15.



their persistency in holding on to the work, but they were prepared to yield their lives in martyrdom<sup>53</sup> sooner than relinquish what George Liele had instituted. So it lived—lived amid the fires of persecution.

Jesse Peter, a member of the church under Liele, and, after the Revolutionary War, pastor of the church at Silver Bluff, saw what was needed to end this persecution, and proceeded to change the aspect of things. He was held in high esteem by the colonists, and Abraham Marshall, of Kiokee, Georgia, was his chief admirer and friend. Accordingly, he secured the services of Abraham Marshall in setting things aright. The church was organized anew, the pastor was ordained to the office of a Baptist minister, and the reestablished church, with its preacher, was brought into membership with the Georgia Baptist Association.<sup>54</sup> As Abraham Marshall was beloved by Georgia Baptists as no other man of the State, it was enough that this church should have his official approval and recognition. Referring to this new order of things, instituted on the 20th day of January, 1788, Marshall, the one associated with Jesse Peter in the undertaking, recognizes Jesse Peter as taking the initiative, when he says, "I assisted in the constitution of the church, and the ordination of the minister."<sup>55</sup>

So ended the second period in the history of this church, as the dawn of its new day began—a day in which the once-persecuted congregation could say: "We enjoy the rights of conscience to a valuable extent, worshipping in our families, preaching three times every Lord's Day, baptizing frequently from ten to thirty at a time, in the Savannah, and

<sup>53</sup> "Andrew Bryan, and his brother Sampson, who was converted about a year after Andrew was, were twice imprisoned and they with about fifty others, without much ceremony, were severely whipped. Andrew was inhumanly cut and bled abundantly; but while under their lashes he held up his hands and told his persecutors that he rejoiced not only to be whipped but would *freely suffer death* for the cause of Christ." *Baptist Home Missions in America*, 1832-1882, Jubilee Volume, p. 388.

<sup>54</sup> Benedict's *History of the Baptists*, edition 1848, p. 170. Compare with p. 723.

<sup>55</sup> Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, 1793, p. 545.

administering the sacred supper, not only without molestation, but in the presence and with the approbation and encouragement of many of the white people.”<sup>58</sup>

Let us recapitulate. We began with the church at Silver Bluff, South Carolina. We were next attracted to Canada, and then to far-off Africa by the labors of David George, the first regular pastor at Silver Bluff. Again we follow a portion of the Silver Bluff Church to Savannah, Georgia. In Savannah we see a church growing under the labors of George Liele, then we find Liele and Amos in the British West Indies, leading large congregations of Negro Baptists. Once more we turn our eyes homeward, and we are attracted to the church at Silver Bluff, South Carolina, to the church at Augusta, Georgia, and the church at Savannah, which, having endured the severest trials, rejoices in recognition and peace—the church of today.

WALTER H. BROOKS

<sup>58</sup> Rippon's *Annual Baptist Register*, 1793–1801, p. 367. Compare with Clark's letter, 1790–1793, p. 540.